SUBCOMMITTEES ON RESEARCH AND ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY, AND STANDARDS
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Opening Statement of Congressman Nick Smith

H.R. 3980, the National Windstorm Impact Reduction Act of 2004

Wednesday, March 24, 2004

Good afternoon, and welcome to this joint hearing between the Research and the Environment Technology and Standards subcommittees to receive testimony about H.R. 3980, the National Windstorm Impact Reduction Act of 2004, which was introduced by Mr. Neugebauer and Mr. Moore.

We have an excellent panel of witnesses with us today, starting with Dr. John Brighton, Assistant Director for Engineering at the National Science Foundation. Before coming to NSF, Dr. Brighton served as Provost of National-Louis University, and prior to that was the Executive Vice President and Provost at Pennsylvania State University.

Our second witness is Anthony Lowe, Administrator of the Federal Insurance Mitigation Administration, a division of the Emergency Preparedness and Response (EPR) Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security. Mr. Lowe testified before the Research Subcommittee last year regarding the National Earthquake Hazard Reduction Program Act of 2003, and I look forward to hearing his comments today. Accompanying Mr. Lowe is Edward Laatsch, Chief of the EPR Building Science and Technology Branch.

I will yield at this time to the gentleman from Kansas, Mr. Moore, to introduce our next witness.

Our last witness to testify today will be Jeffrey Sciaudone, Director of Engineering and Technical Services for the Institute for Business and Home Safety. Mr. Sciaudone represents IBHS on various technical industry committees concerning natural disaster mitigation and oversees the development of products dealing with the public understanding of natural hazard mitigation. He also serves on the International Code Council's Industry Advisory Committee.

While some areas of the country are affected more than others by windstorms, every state in the union is vulnerable. In my district last August, 70-mile per hour straight-line winds knocked down trees, destroyed barns, and left 10,000 people without power. In addition to the evident physical damage that was caused, many businesses and schools in the area were closed temporarily until power could be restored.

The need to reduce vulnerability is really two-fold. The immediate and most obvious problem is that annual damage from windstorms is estimated to be multiple billions of dollars. Most efforts to reduce windstorm impacts today focus on weather prediction and evacuation. This strategy has been successful at reducing windstorm deaths, but does not address the problem of damage to the built environment. A greater focus on making buildings and structures more wind resistant would be useful in reducing the cost of windstorms.

Perhaps an even scarier issue is that with rapid population growth in high-risk areas, our vulnerability is increasing every year. As population in an area grows, new structures and infrastructure are built to accommodate the new residents. If new construction in these high-risk areas does not incorporate adequate mitigation techniques, damage sustained from windstorms will escalate.

H.R. 3980 would create a federal interagency program to reduce windstorm impacts. The legislation focuses on three component areas: developing a better understanding of how high winds impact buildings and structures, enhanced windstorm damage data collection and analysis, and developing and implementing mitigation strategies.

I look forward to hearing comments on H.R. 3980 from our witnesses and expect that they will lead to a productive discussion.